

## *Functional language analysis in teaching reading of history-related texts in EFL context*

Anna Kiszczak

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland

[kiszczak.anna@gmail.com](mailto:kiszczak.anna@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The integration of language and discipline-specific knowledge is widely acknowledged to play an important role in second/foreign language teaching. There is no denying that studying content subjects demands reading specific text genres, characterized by specialized lexico-grammar and discourse structure. Therefore, it is reasonable and highly justifiable for English language teachers to incorporate elements of content area reading into classroom instruction to make it more beneficial for language learners. The aim of the present paper is to report the findings an action research study conducted with a view to examining the issue of constructing and performing reading tasks based on selected history-related texts by adopting the principles of the functional language analysis approach, proposed by Fang and Schleppegrell (2008, 2010). The primary goal of the study was to investigate whether the techniques worked out by the advocates of this approach can be helpful to EFL learners in reading history passages, and, consequently, whether they can contribute to satisfactory comprehension gains by learners reading content area texts. The analysis of the data enabled the researcher to reach a number of conclusions concerning the most problematic aspects facing secondary school readers in dealing with distinctive features of history texts, their attitudes to reading this type of texts and their evaluation of the practices adopted to deal with discipline-specific texts.

## 1. Introduction

Schleppegrell, Achugar and Oteiza (2004: 67) observe that “language and content are never separate” and thus language should be taught in close relationship with subject matter. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an approach promoting the integration of teaching second/foreign languages and content-area subjects, acknowledges the indisputable importance of developing reading as a fundamental skill indispensable for teaching and learning both disciplinary knowledge and language (Wallace 2003; Gajo 2007; Hudson 2007; Chodkiewicz 2011). Due to the fact that learning content subjects requires reading, comprehending and interpreting numerous discipline-specific texts containing specialized syntax, morphology and lexis (Schleppegrell and de Oliveira 2006; Foster 2011; Marino 2011; Chodkiewicz 2013), there is no denying that students should be prepared to cope with a wide variety of such materials. Functional language analysis provides a useful framework for studying content area written documents by means of language analysis, which significantly contributes to understanding texts and expanding subject knowledge.

## 2. Functional language analysis and content area reading

Functional language analysis is an approach offering language-based procedures of text analysis aimed at developing reading comprehension competence. The roots of this approach lie in systemic functional linguistics, which claims that language enables conveying various meanings of messages, depending on the circumstances, contexts and purposes of a given text (Schleppegrell, Achugar and Oteiza 2004; Macken-Horarik 2006). The idea of differentiating between three kinds of text meaning embedded in clauses was introduced by Halliday (1994), who coined the concepts of *experiential*, *interpersonal* and *textual meaning* (Fang and Schleppegrell 2008).

The aim of performing functional language analysis of content texts is closely connected with investigating the three senses of texts which are transmitted primarily by specific verb choices, participants, process types, circumstances and relationships existing between them (Fang and Schleppegrell 2010). All of these strategies are incorporated into the process of reading in order to engage with texts, view them critically and recognize the importance of language structures and functions present in discipline-specific documents (Achugar, Schleppegrell and Oteiza 2007; Schleppegrell, Greer and Taylor 2008).

### 3. The study

#### 3.1. The purpose of the study

The primary goal of the action research study reported in this paper was to investigate whether classroom activities involving functional language analysis would be found efficient and helpful in teaching reading of history-related texts to EFL advanced learners. More specifically, the objectives of the study were as follows:

- 1) to familiarize the students with the ways of implementing functional language analysis to explore history-related texts in EFL lessons;
- 2) to make the students aware of the differences between the features of three types of history texts (i.e. a chronicling text, a point of view text, an explanation text);
- 3) to examine the understanding of which features of history texts and which aspects of functional language analysis prove to be most problematic for the readers;
- 4) to investigate the EFL students' attitudes to reading history-related texts and their response to the procedures implemented in the study.

#### 3.2. The participants

The participants of the study were ten native speakers of Polish – 17-year-old students (six girls, four boys) attending a private secondary school in Lublin, Poland. They had completed one-year the Pre-IB Programme and were enrolled in the first form of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, which meant that their subject classes were delivered in English. The declared level of the students' general proficiency in English was C1+ according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for language learning and teaching*.

#### 3.3. Texts and tasks used in the study

The four texts selected for the study constituted the basis for the lessons designed and conducted by the present author who acted in the capacity of the researcher. The principal criterion for text selection was the presence of linguistic features of history-related written documents to be dealt with during the lessons. Bearing in mind the requirements for using adequate texts to introduce functional language analysis (Fang and Schleppegrell 2008), the texts were controlled for their length. All the texts were accompanied by worksheets and homework assignments.

Each lesson, and, consequently, each worksheet prepared for the purpose of a particular lesson, and the study itself, focused on one specific type of a history text and its study through functional language analysis. Table 1 lists the aspects of functional language analysis covered in the lessons based on 3 different history-text types. The final part of the worksheets included homework assignments, which constituted an important research tool. Not only did it provide some elements of lesson revision, but it was also a source of knowledge concerning the students' learning outcomes for the researcher.

Text types	Aspects of functional language analysis covered in the lessons
A chronicling history text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– text coherence;</li> <li>– three main kinds of text meaning (experiential, interpersonal, textual);</li> <li>– the role of topic sentences in a history text;</li> <li>– time references in text organisation vs. chronology of events.</li> </ul>
A point of view history text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– perspective of the author and the event actors;</li> <li>– classification of the types of processes (doing, sensing, saying, being) and verbs used to express them.</li> </ul>
An explanation history text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the categorization of the roles, functions and relationships of the event actors;</li> <li>– the interplay between the types of processes and the event actors;</li> <li>– the organizational features of a history text;</li> <li>– identification of a clause theme.</li> </ul>

Table 1: The structure of the three history-based lessons.

### 3.4. Research design and procedure

The study was conducted during four 45-minute English classes over a two-week period. All the classes, which familiarized the students with the major aspects of functional language analysis, had a similar structure; however, since the tasks and lesson procedures depended on the type of text, the kinds of activities offered differed. Each lesson moved on through the pre-, while- and post-reading stages incorporating relevant aspects of functional language analysis, accompanied by the metalanguage to be worked upon. The tasks ranged from controlled, receptive and cognitively undemanding, to free, productive and cognitively challenging ones so as to engage the students in performing basic functional analysis of the texts gradually and progressively.

The participants were also asked to fill out two questionnaires – a pre-study questionnaire and a post-study one. The former aimed to provide factual, behavioral and attitudinal information about the participants, whereas the latter elicited the subjects' evaluation of the suggested way of approaching history-related written materials. However, due to the fact that the primary focus in this paper is the analysis of text selection and the students' performance on the tasks set, the results of the questionnaires will not be discussed in detail.

### 3.5. The analysis of the tasks completed by the students

Most of the activities aimed at building the participants' explicit knowledge of functional language analysis and their understanding of how this approach can direct the reader in the process of studying the ways in which particular types of texts are constructed by historians. The array of tasks employed by the teacher-researcher required answering questions, listing, gap-filling, as well as ordering, sorting, matching or doing multiple choice items tasks, most of which drew upon the students' higher-order thinking skills that involved interpreting, comparing, evaluating and justifying.

As far as the aspects of text coherence and text organization are concerned, the participants were provided with adequate explanation and tasks regarding the role of topic sentences in a history text and the difference between time markers used in the description of the chronology of events and in text organization. It could be observed that determining the role of linking words such as 'firstly' or 'secondly' in organizing an argument and coming up with different time markers representing each of the types of Time Circumstantial Meaning were equally problematic for most of the students.

Filling in a table with examples of all process types constituted one of the tasks preparing the students for conducting functional analysis of history texts. Even though the participants encountered no major problems with providing examples of Doing and Being Processes, they found it challenging to distinguish certain instances of Saying and Sensing Processes since some of the thinking-feeling verbs could have been misinterpreted.

The most arduous tasks involved the introduction and the analysis of Participant Roles and Functions. Most of the students found it difficult to identify Participants Roles typical of Being Processes – Attributes, Values, Tokens and Phenomena. Yet, almost all of them provided correct answers to the question items in which the event participant was in turn an Actor and a Carrier. As many as seven students encountered problems while supplying an example to a sentence containing an Attribute as a participant. Most of the erroneous answers provided by the students included sentences with a Token instead of an Attribute.

The students were able to see the relationship between the explicit knowledge of the functional language analysis framework and the ways of studying history texts in terms of different functional elements of particular passages. On balance, the analysis of the texts by following the rules of functional language analysis, proved to be a success. Not only did the participants express their interest in carrying out the analysis, but they generally succeeded in accomplishing it. The most demanding activity involved answering the questions connected with the perspective of the author.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The findings of the study revealed that the vast majority of the students appreciated the innovative manner of reading history-related texts and half of the participants expressed their wish to approach history texts from the point of view of linguistic analysis in the future. The participants demonstrated their abilities to take advantage of both the theoretical and practical knowledge gained during the lessons while doing their homework assignments. The subjects perceived investigating the connection between the described events and actors and analyzing topic sentences as the most helpful activities employed with a view to comprehending history texts effectively. As far as reading difficulties are concerned, some of the students apparently experienced problems with differentiating time markers and linking words typical of argument organization.

As Pawlak (2010) recommends, learning a second or foreign language can be enhanced by means of engaging both content area matter and cognitive processes. Thus, studying texts by performing language analysis may constitute a valuable tool for language learning and represent a promising solution to the problem of efficient comprehension of content area texts. Therefore, it is essential to regularly instruct students on how to approach discipline-specific texts even though this may seem challenging at first. Reading and studying such texts with the use of functional language analysis requires further empirical investigations in order to adequately describe the relationship between the development of L2 students' content reading skills and content/ disciplinary knowledge.

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